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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [ELAB](#) [UY](#)  
SUBJECT: DICTATORSHIP'S WOUNDS STILL FELT IN URUGUAY

Classified By: Charge de Affaires a.i.  
James D. Nealon for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary and Introduction: Uruguay's ongoing debate over the teaching of history and a recent public shouting match between the sons of important actors during Uruguay's dictatorship both illustrate the importance of that period to modern politics and policy in Uruguay. The complex history of the dictatorship created heroes and villains for both the left and right. Some of the persons involved are still active in politics, and the real and imagined lessons from the period continue to inform modern politicians. Uruguay is only now devising a curriculum through which to teach this subject in its history classes, but sensitivities may still run too hot to effectively complete the project. A contentious debate between the son of the slain opposition congressman Zelmar Michelini and the son of Juan Bordaberry who was president at the beginning of the dictatorship, grabbed national attention October 4. Although the dictatorship ended more than 20 years ago, its conflicts are still unresolved in the public mind, and the policies of key factions of the governing Frente Amplio coalition continue to reflect a strong reaction to this period. End Summary and Introduction.

RECAP: CAUSES AND DOWNFALL OF URUGUAY'S DICTATORSHIP  
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¶2. (U) In the late 1960s, a long accumulation of deteriorating political and economic factors produced severe social and labor unrest and the rise of the National Liberation Movement - Tupamaros (MLN-T), a guerrilla group that began a campaign of urban terrorism. These conditions gradually ushered in a process of steadily increasing military involvement in the country's political life. Initially, the police were charged with suppressing the insurgency, but proved unable to stem the escalating wave of kidnappings, bombings, and assassinations. Successive Colorado Party Presidents Jorge Pacheco (1967-72) and Juan Bordaberry (1972-76) resorted to states of siege that permitted the military to act in the name of "national security" with scant regard for civil liberties and laws. During this period Tupamaros kidnapped three American embassy employees, including Dan Mitrione who, in 1971, was killed by the Tupamaros and later slandered in leftist circles as a "CIA torturer." In September 1971, President Pacheco called on the military to take primary responsibility for the fight against the Tupamaros. The armed forces were well equipped for the task and virtually wiped out the insurgency within a matter of months.

¶3. (U) However, once engaged, the military viewed its mandate as one to re-establish internal order at all costs and embarked on a campaign to purge the country of "undesirable leftists, opposition and union elements." Constitutional safeguards, suspended during the declaration of "internal war," were prolonged by new legislation that put draconian controls on the media and on dissent. The new laws also by-passed normal legal protections and allowed for persons charged with crimes against national security to be detained and subject to trial in military courts. In June 1973, the military forced then-President Bordaberry to suspend the democratic process and accept military rule through a National Security Council (COSENA) composed of senior military officers and the ministers of Defense, Interior, and Foreign Affairs.

¶4. (U) During the early and mid-dictatorship period, the military moved brutally against anyone it deemed as a threat to national security. An estimated 6,000 citizens were tried in military courts, and human rights groups charged that tens of thousands had been detained, denied legal rights, or were tortured. Some 300,000-400,000 Uruguayans reportedly fled into exile, and in some instances became victims of the security forces in neighboring countries. The number of Uruguay's "disappeared" persons during the "dirty war" is estimated by some at around 150 with at least 28 confirmed dead. The statistics, however, remain in dispute. In 1980 under intense international pressure including from the U.S., military officials conducted a referendum to legitimize their rule through constitutional reform. The referendum failed, and negotiations began for a return to democracy. In 1984 the "Naval Club Pact" -- a political agreement between the armed forces and four political parties paved the way for the military to exit power.

¶5. (U) In 1985 the military finally relinquished power following the election of Julio Maria Sanguinetti in October 1984. A blanket amnesty was granted to the Tupamaros and other opponents of the regime. But in the transition from a military dictatorship to a democracy, Uruguay still faced the dilemma of having to decide between prosecuting military officers for crimes committed under the period of military rule (and risk a military revolt) or granting them an amnesty. In December 1986, Congress approved the Expiration Law ("Ley de Caducidad") that granted amnesty to members of the military and police for acts committed prior to March 1, 1985. Seen as an "impunity law" by its critics, the controversial measure was put to a public referendum on April 16, 1989 when citizens voted 57 percent in favor of keeping the law in effect. Successive governments of Luis Alberto Lacalle, Sanguinetti (second administration) and Jorge Batlle did relatively little to re-open investigations of human rights abuse cases, with the exception of Batlle's "Peace Commission" that was established to compile facts and helped him gain greater popularity. On March 1, 2005 Tabare Vazquez took office and promised to pursue human rights issues, declaring, "We are not hostages to the past, but Uruguayan society needs to know what happened so that it never happens again."

#### USES AND ABUSES OF HISTORY

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¶6. (SBU) Uruguay's national curriculum committee (ANEP) continues to generate strong debate as it seeks to include the period of the Uruguayan dictatorship in the nation's history curriculum. Several sources believe the MPP, part of the FA coalition government and led by several former Tupamaro guerrillas, is behind the new interest in "recent history." In their eyes, the history of the period begins with the allegedly harsh police response to the visit of Ernesto "Che" Guevara in 1961 when one of Guevara's associates was killed by a militant right-wing activist. In hindsight they portray their movement as a defense of civil liberties. A former military officer of the era remembered the history differently and told us that civilians regularly acted as informants and applauded as police arrested

Tupamaros. The Blanco Party hopes the new curriculum will honor one of its elder statesmen, Wilson Ferreira Aldunate, for what they believe was his key role in the end of the dictatorship. One of the historians working on the curriculum created a huge stir in September when he stated his "personal belief" that pressure from the United States was the primary cause of the end of the dictatorship. The depth of feeling over the issue on all sides demonstrates its hold on society, and may indefinitely delay agreement on the curriculum.

¶7. (U) On a television talk show October 4, Pedro Bordaberry, son of former-President Juan Bordaberry, described his ongoing attempts to clear his father's name. During the broadcast, FA Senator Rafael Michelini appeared in the studio and was granted permission to speak. On air, he accused the former president of complicity in the killing of Zelmar Michelini in Buenos Aires during the dictatorship. The senior Michelini, Rafael's father, was a vocal member of the banned opposition. In response, Bordaberry's son, Pedro, called Michelini "a liar" and played audio tapes of Michelini and another FA politician stating that they did not blame former-President Bordaberry for the crime. The acrimony between two sons searching for closure shows the emotional intensity still connected to the period, and the front-page coverage by major newspapers of the debate illustrates the continuing breadth of interest in Uruguay.

#### MODERN IMPACT

¶8. (C) Despite the GOU's general engagement with the U.S., some elements of the left distrust the US and fear connection with a nation they believe supported the dictatorship. In mantra-like fashion, union leaders, Communists, the MPP, and hard-core Socialists regularly disparage the U.S. in terms identical to those used during the Cold War, and loudly grumble about cooperation with the U.S. But while the vocal few often do not hold real power, their lingering prejudices have a chilling effect on some aspects of US/GOU relations. Since the FA came to power, no GOU representatives have attended Trafficking in Persons or biotechnology seminars sponsored by the Embassy. The Embassy has limited access to several ministries controlled by far-left ministers. And more than 18 months after the beginning of the FA government, some bureaucrats work hard to avoid meeting USG representatives. The Vazquez administration must contend with virulent objections from within the FA in his quest to improve trade ties with the U.S.

¶9. (C) Memories of the dictatorship also affect FA policy toward the military and police. The GOU has kept a tight reign on military and police budgets despite a crumbling military capability and increasing crime. In addition Vazquez ordered the military in 2005 to allow forensic experts to search for the remains of the "disappeared" on select military bases. After personally ramming Uruguay's participation in the UNITAS naval exercise with the U.S. through Parliament in 2005, President Vazquez cancelled Uruguayan participation in 2006. He remains open to UNITAS pending the results of an ongoing review of Uruguay's defense structure, and pending an Uruguayan request to make UNITAS more relevant to Uruguay's defense needs. (Note: Although the armed forces quickly crushed the Tupamaros in 1971, a small remnant of dedicated Communist insurgents remained active far longer. This explains why many of the disappeared Uruguayans were Communists rather than Tupamaros. In 1986, President Julio Maria Sanguinetti reportedly entered into a tacit agreement with the Communists to get them to lay down their arms. This Colorado-Communist accord or "COCO" allowed the Marxists to maintain strong influence in the labor unions and higher education. Significantly, Communist influence remains dominant in both sectors to this day. End Note.)

#### COMMENT

¶10. (C) Participants in the insurgency and the ideological

left are still active in major parties of the FA coalition, but while they have passed on their ideological legacy, they have generally been unable to develop leaders to organize and direct the future of the movement. The leaders of the far left are in their 70s, and few have an heir apparent. When the Socialist party elder statesman Guillermo Chifflet retired, one of his proteges told us that the party increasingly saw him as out of step with the new course charted by Tabare Vazquez. Several political observers believe that when the current leadership of the MPP retires in the next few years, the movement will be ungovernable as inept radical deputies fight among themselves. The one exception to this rule is the powerful union movement in Uruguay (PIT-CNT) which continues to have strong Communist sympathies, fervent anti-U.S. rhetoric, and well-established institutions. Union institutions exercise power through GOU-established labor boards, short but regular work stoppages and occupations of production facilities. Because Vazquez continues to set a new course for the left, the future of the far-left is further in doubt. But leftist reaction to the dictatorship period remains high, and will continue to exert strong influence on Uruguayan politics for some time to come. End Comment.

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